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ABSTRACT

Outlined and discussed in this speech are five points based on the assumption that major changes occurring in our society must be accompanied by equally significant changes in the education provided for the children growing up in this society. From the perspective of Alvin Toffler's "Future Shock," this paper points up the need to analyze what kind of education is required to help children learn to cope with change. (CS)

BALANCING BASICS--WHAT IS BASIC
IN EARLY CHILDHOOD AND ELEMENTARY EDUCATION?*

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There are many approaches which might be taken to a topic Balancing Basics--What is Basic? One approach would be to insert words such as "for the classroom teacher", "for the administrator", "for the child". Or we might make it more narrow--in human relations, in the three "r's", in environmental settings. Instead of any one of these, I have chosen to use the broad approach without going into great detail in any of these specific areas. I would like to outline and discuss five points which I think must be considered in answering the question: Balancing Basics--What is Basic? These points are based on the assumption that major changes which are occurring in our society must be accompanied by equally significant and important changes in the education provided for the children who are growing up in this society. For background in preparing this paper, I have drawn heavily on the ideas of Alvin Toffler in FUTURE SHOCK¹ and wish to give due credit.

A Consistent Direction and a Logical Starting Point

To anyone currently involved in schools, there is no doubt, education is changing. In early childhood education we have Planned Variation and Follow Through based on implementation of a number of different curriculum models. Although neither program is as yet widely implemented, both are

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focused on the implementation of major change not only in what goes on in the classroom but in the relationships between the school and community. In elementary education we have open space schools, open classrooms, family groupings, team teaching, and wide use of classroom aides very few of which we had ten years ago and most of which represent considerable improvement over practices of the past. If we take a further look, however, much of what is happening represents a refinement of the existing machinery to make it more efficient in pursuit of the same goals that have served us for many years in the past. We seem to be randomly trying this and that without any clear sense of direction.

The basic question--What is the role of the school?--is no nearer a clear answer than it was twenty years ago, maybe we have less sense of direction because of the possibilities that are open to us. Questions are being raised about the school as an institution--whether some of education might not better be done in the home. The reports prepared by Moore² and his associates have created quite a controversy with their proposal that education should be a function of the home until about age eight. I suspect that few of you would agree with that proposal as it applies to children in the six to eight age range but more of you would agree with it for children in the three to five age range. I expect that few parents would support his opinions especially the parents of the six to eight year olds. Yet, technological advances are such that, especially with older children, many parents are clearly more capable of teaching their own children from a knowledge perspective than are their teachers.

A recent article³ questioned whether the years spent in school should be cut back. The suggestion was to begin "schooling" with age four using the usual K-12 program and to reduce the present 13 years of school attendance to 12 ending "forced schooling" at age 14. The contradictions are obvious. What we seem to need is a planned approach to the future. Of course, we need to preserve what is worthwhile about current education but we need to clarify the function of education before we know what is relevant and what must be discarded as having served its purpose.

A Balance between Concern for the Present and Focus on the Future

The children we teach in elementary schools and especially our children under eight are very present oriented. As opposed to a present or future orientation much of education today is based on the past. Toffler describes the whole educational hierarchy of today as following the model of industrial bureaucracy. The most criticized features of education today--the regimentation, lack of individualization, rigid systems of seating, grouping, grading and marking, and the authoritarian role of the teacher--are precisely those that helped to make mass public education so effective an instrument of adaptation at an earlier time.⁴ The rapid obsolescence of knowledge and the extension of the life span make it clear that the skills learned in the school years will not remain relevant by the time adulthood is reached, not to mention old age. No one is more aware of this than teachers who search for materials to deal with today's problems or who today are struggling with ways to treat Watergate and the energy crisis in the classroom.

There is a kind of future orientation present in many early childhood and elementary programs today which I feel does not utilize the proper kind

of look ahead. This is reflected in the downward push of knowledge. The kindergarten teacher feels a definite pressure to teach to the expectation of the first grade teacher--to get the children ready for what they will next experience. This reflects the same kind of expectancy referred to earlier in the proposal to move the content down at least a year. It is still oriented toward the past.

What seems to be called for is a complete revision of content and of procedures which look to the characteristics an individual must have to be able to live as comfortably as possible with change. We need to analyze what kind of education it takes to produce citizens who can make critical judgments and who can weave their way through novel environments and spot new relationships. In other words, the present must emphasize characteristics which enable the person to learn to cope with change. This implies the ability to make more and more choices, to learn how to learn new skills and to develop new interests. It seems to call for a plug-in-plug-out life-long education as we cannot possibly learn all we need to know during the early years of life. What the child learns at any one time is based on his ability at the time but some of the processes and procedures provide experience in making responsible choices.

A Balance between Diversity and Common Reference Points

Even children as young as elementary school can be exposed to a wide variety of experiences. I am deeply disturbed as I see what is happening as the money crunch becomes more serious in the schools and more and more the so-called frills disappear from the curriculum. We have every reason to believe that children today will have more time than their parents to spend in leisure and creative activities. We need to strive for a balance

between the reading, math, and science and the art, music, creative dramatics, dance, photography and other arts. Why not create some mini courses to explore the unknown, the unexpected, and the possible?

Lest you think I am wholly for the diverse and the "far-out". Not so. The ability to make choices is based in part on the sharing of certain common skills needed for human communication and social integration. Children have an even greater need for skills such as reading and writing and expressing themselves effectively than in the past. Their world has expanded so that the understanding of society in our country is no longer enough as children's lives are influenced by our interdependence with other nations of the world. As is true in some of the current science and math programs today, more emphasis must be put on the process of learning. In early childhood education we refer to learning how to learn--learning to explore, to taste, to touch, to listen, to experiment--to find out answers for himself. In older children it means acquiring the ability to evaluate and discard old ideas and replace them with new and untried ones.

A further common skill needed is a kind of human adaptability. We see evidence of this kind of adaptability in the classroom almost every day. Some children are ready with new ideas to try and quickly change to a new approach if the first does not work. Other children are upset by the slightest change in routine or setting. Life will become increasingly difficult for these children unless they can feel more comfort in the common reference points so they can venture into a few situations where the outcomes are more diverse and unpredictable. We have to make children conscious of both the things they know and the skills they have for dealing with diverse choices. They have the right to be unique but it makes a difference how this uniqueness is used.

We in ACEI have through the years published materials and supported a philosophy of humanistic education, even during the decade of the 60's when it tended to be looked down upon. The need for children to develop rewarding human ties and lasting friendships is becoming an increasingly important common reference point. The acceleration of the pace of living, the transience of families and the deep feelings of loneliness which even children experience can either be accentuated or at least partially improved by the interactions of children with other children and teachers in the classroom.

A Balance between Specific Goals and a Willingness to Let Goals Evolve

In this era of behavioral objectives a willingness to let goals evolve may seem quite contradictory. Perhaps so if you are a confirmed devotee of behavioral objectives. Personally, I have a view of behavioral objectives which admits that goals and objectives are necessary but when they become unrealistic or inappropriate, goals must be relinquished or at least be modified. So it is with goals that are future oriented. The specifics of the future are not highly predicatable. It is basic for the classroom teacher to make the adjustment between an original goal and the situation as it develops. A good classroom teacher is faced with children with a wide range of skills and abilities even with a group of three year olds, but more so with a group of nine year olds. It is necessary to do as in Teahouse of the August Moon: To learn the wisdom of gracious acceptance, to make peace between ambition and limitation, a step backward in the right direction.⁵

A Critical Examination of Values that Influence Decision-Making

Only during the last few years have we begun to have curriculum efforts directed at the affective area of learning. The Human Development Program

and the television series, Ripples for primary children and Inside Out for older children, are curriculum efforts designed to promote discussion of feelings and values. Although there is little doubt that widespread ignorance could be substantiated whether to provide sex education is one of the most controversial issues in many communities not to mention religion, politics, and racial and social prejudice. These are so value laden that for the most part we just seem to ignore them with the apparent hope that they will go away. Day care, and to some extent all early childhood education, are considered by some an attempt to replace the home in the role of inculcating the values of society. Discussion of value laden situations causes discomfort and uncertainty regarding the questions that may arise and the kinds of answers that may need to be given. Today, it embarrasses many teachers to be reminded that all sorts of values are transmitted to children in classrooms--through their textbooks, through the informal curriculum, the simple physical aspects of the room such as the seating arrangements, the authority of the teacher, the age and social class segregation, and the very fact that children are in school at all. Seldom are children helped to analyze their own values and those of their teachers and peers.

It is difficult for us to search out the contradictions in our own value systems. Yet, we probably cannot give children maximum help with sorting out their value systems unless we do. Family life-styles of today are so vastly different today for the children within any classroom that it is critical to accept ways of behaving that might have been rejected in the classrooms of a few years ago. It helps to know what our values are and why we respond as we do.

Conclusion

As I review the points that I have made in this paper, it seems that ~~the~~^{direction} adaptability and change are basic in early childhood education and elementary education. Rohwer in his article "Prime Time for Education: Early Childhood or Adolescence"⁶ stated: "The effectiveness of schooling practices should be judged by the degree to which they assist the student to be adaptive with respect to extra-school tasks." While I have a difficult time accepting the term "schooling" as applied to early childhood education, such a definition may help us escape some of the problems which currently plague us. We may be able to focus on the broader, more inclusive and more significant questions -- how to help children learn to cope with the future-- how to meet the problems of overchoice. To translate these problems into what we teach children below the age of adolescence will never be easy but we may discover ways to work which will reduce the over-emphasis on the past and the acquisition of an outdated education. Education is changing, the world is changing even faster. Let us hope we can change in a way that guides and leads rather than follows and rejects.

Footnotes

- ¹ Toffler, Alvin, FUTURE SHOCK, Random House, New York, 1970.
- ² Moore, Raymond S. and Moore, Dennis R., "How Early Should They Go to School", Childhood Education, 50:14-20, October, 1973.
- ³ Gebret, Kenneth G., "Bring an End to Forced Schooling at Age 14", Christian Science Monitor, January 7, 1974, p. F-3.
- ⁴ Toffler, p. 355.
- ⁵ Patrick, John, The Teahouse of the August Moon in The Best Plays of 1953-1954, Ed. by Louis Kronenberger, New York, Dodd Mead & Co., 1954, p. 182.
- ⁶ Rohwer, William D., "Prime Time for Education: Early Childhood or Adolescence," Harvard Educational Review 41:316-340, August, 1971.